

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2011*

## **Remarks on Ensuring Fair Pay for Homecare Workers**

*December 15, 2011*

Hello, everybody. As I said in Kansas last week, the defining issue of our time is whether we can build an economy where hard work pays off and responsibility is rewarded. It's whether this is going to be a country where working people can earn enough to raise a family and build a modest savings and own a home, secure their own retirement, look after their kids. That's the test of our time.

In some cases, building this kind of economy is going to require some action from Congress. And right now Congress needs to make sure that 160 million working Americans don't see their taxes go up on January 1. None of the workers who joined us here today can afford a thousand-dollar tax increase next year. And it wouldn't be good for the economy. Every economist indicates that it's important for us to extend the payroll tax cut and make sure that unemployment insurance is extended. So this Congress cannot and should not leave for vacation until that—until they have made sure that that tax increase doesn't happen. Let me repeat that: Congress should not and cannot go on vacation before they have made sure that working families aren't seeing their taxes go up by a thousand dollars and those who are out there looking for work don't see their unemployment insurance expire.

There's no reason why we shouldn't be able to extend these items—the payroll tax cut, UI—before the holidays. There's no reason the Government should shut down over this. And I expect all of us to do what's necessary in order to do the people's business and make sure that it's done before the end of the year.

Now, only Congress can prevent the payroll tax from going up next year. But there are also some things that we can do without Congress to help make sure that hard work pays off. And that's why we're here today.

Right behind me here is my friend Pauline Beck. One day back in 2007, Pauline was my boss. I was in California to take part in an event called "Walk a Day in My Shoes," where you'd spend the day working the job of someone who was in the service industry. And I was lucky enough to be paired up with Pauline, and I have to tell you, it ended up being one of my favorite days of the entire campaign.

Pauline is a home health care worker. When we met, she was getting up every day at 5 a.m. to go to work taking care of an 86-year-old amputee named Mr. John. And each day, she'd dress Mr. John and help him into his wheelchair. She'd make him breakfast. She'd scrub his floors. She'd clean his bathroom. She was his connection to the outside world. And when the workday was done, she would go home to take care of a grandnephew and two foster children who didn't have families of their own. Heroic work and hard work, that's what Pauline was all about.

And one of the things I remember about Pauline was her patience. She was patient with me even when I didn't wring out the mop properly or I didn't shake out the sheets before putting them in the laundry bin. But I also remember listening to her talk about the hardships in her life, and she did so without any self-pity. She was glad to be working hard, and she was glad to be helping someone. All she wanted in return for a hard day's work was enough to take

care of those kids she was going home to, enough to save a little bit for retirement, maybe take a day off once in a while to rest her aching back.

Now, each of the folks who are here today has a story like Pauline's. They represent nearly 1.8 million homecare workers across the country, hard-working professionals, mostly women, who work around the clock so that folks who need help, including many of our family members, can live independently in their own home. Right now home care is one of the fastest growing industries in America, partly because we're getting older as a society. And as the baby boom generation heads into retirement, more and more Americans are going to need the services of these outstanding workers.

But here's the thing: As the homecare business has changed over the years, the law hasn't changed to keep up. So even though workers like Pauline do everything from bathing to cooking, they're still lumped in the same category as teenage babysitters when it comes to how much they make. That means employers are allowed to pay these workers less than minimum wage with no overtime. That's right, you can wake up at 5 in the morning, care for somebody every minute of the day, take the late bus home at night, and still make less than the minimum wage. And this means that many homecare workers are forced to rely on things like food stamps just to make ends meet.

And that's just wrong. In this country, it's unexcusable. I can tell you firsthand that these men and women, they work their tails off, and they don't complain. And they deserve to be treated fairly. They deserve to be paid fairly for a service that many older Americans couldn't live without. And companies who do pay fair wages to these women shouldn't be put at a disadvantage.

Now, 4 years ago, a homecare worker named Evelyn Coke took her case all the way up to the Supreme Court. And Evelyn was working up to 70 hours a week with no overtime pay. But the Court ruled against her, saying that to change the law would require action from Congress or the Department of Labor. I'm sure many of you won't be surprised to know that Congress hasn't acted on this issue so far.

Today I will. Today we're guaranteeing homecare workers minimum wage and overtime pay protection. And that's thanks to the hard work of my Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis. We are going to make sure that over a million men and women in one of the fastest growing professions in the country don't slip through the cracks. We're going to make sure that companies who do right by their workers aren't undercut by companies who don't. We're going to do what's fair, and we're going to do what's right.

Now, Evelyn Coke didn't live to see this day. But the truth is, Americans like Evelyn and Pauline and the rest of the workers who are here today, they're one of the reasons that I ran for President. They work hard. They play by the rules. In exchange, they just want to see that their hard work and their responsibility is rewarded. It's that simple. Americans all deserve a fair shake and a fair shot. And as long as I have the honor of serving as President, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that those very modest expectations are fulfilled. I'm going to make sure that they are treated right. I'm going to make sure that every American is treated fairly.

Thanks very much, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:13 p.m. in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Damian Beck, grandnephew of homecare worker Pauline Beck of Oakland, CA.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Homecare workers, ensuring fair pay.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Beck, Damian; Beck, Pauline; Solis, Hilda L.

*Subjects:* Employment and unemployment : Unemployment insurance; Health and medical care : Home health care; Labor issues : Homecare workers; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Taxation : Payroll tax cut.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD201100947.